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ABSTRACT

The implications of family communication styles for teaching English as a second language (ESL) are explored. Family interaction types differ according to culture and social class. Factors in family interaction influence the way a second language is learned and the way it can best be taught. Two basic family types are distinguished: the personal type in which open expressive verbalization is encouraged, and the positional type in which verbal behavior is regulated according to status and hierarchy. ESL students from cultures characterized by positional families may respond best to direct questions in the classroom, while students from personal family types may respond best to voluntary participation. Role differentiation between the teacher and students would be more readily accepted by students from positional family types. Family type differences can also be used in formulating approaches for teaching ESL in foreign family settings. An example is given of the influence of hierarchical concepts on language instruction in a Korean family. (RW)

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A Family Communication Model for Teaching English as a Second Language

In the acquisition of a second language, in all cultures, the family is the place where communication patterns emerge, develop and are reinforced through practice. Although in all cultures children are born into a world which is structured for their inclusion, cultures differ with respect to the value they place on verbal mediation, that is, solving problems through verbal means, as a factor in regulating behavior and higher psychological processes. Thus, for example, Wertsch (1979) reported that in American middle-class families mothers emphasize speaking in giving instructions to their children to finish a task (do a puzzle), while in Brazilian families, Arns (1981) found that mothers did not emphasize the verbal and focused instead on non-verbal mediation to accomplish a similar task with their children.

Another reason for looking at the family, one related to the first, is that there are family types which are manifestations of culture, and that factors in family interaction in the milieu of different family types influence the way a second language is learned as well as the way it can best be taught.

Differences among family types have been discussed more with respect to social class than to culture. While in some respects Rommetveit (1977) also considered this problem from the point of view

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of class, Bernstein (1969) approached it explicitly from a family perspective which I will take up now, returning to Rommetveit later. When Bernstein first argued that communication patterns were sociologically correlated phenomena, he was looking at differences between working-class and the middle-class children in Britain. It should be stressed that Bernstein's class analyses are explicitly relevant to British society alone, but let me add that for heuristic purposes, Bernstein's analyses do suggest hypotheses relevant to the situations we encounter here in teaching ESL to persons of widely disparate cultural and familial backgrounds.

A major distinction in Bernstein's work is his distinction between two types of families, the positional and the personal. Bernstein analyzed these two kinds of family types in terms of "the principles which for any one family control the allocation of decision making." (p. 152) If decision making is directly related to status or role, the type of family, according to his framework, would be called "positional." This does not necessarily imply a "cold" or authoritarian family system. Rather, it suggests a family structure in which there is a clear separation of roles. These roles are formally defined and members of such a family, according to Bernstein (p. 153), form very close relationships - strong solidarity, parents with grandparents and children with their siblings. In addition, status dictates how control is allocated in such families. For example, how parents would regulate the verbal and non-verbal behavior of their children. Positional family structures thus generate "closed communication systems." In these communication systems children have learned to use "communalized"

roles rather than the individual (e.g., the "we" is more important than the "I"), reducing the possibility of linguistic choice or verbal elaboration.

I have encountered families learning English as a second language who display problems in learning language--problems that are unrelated to pedagogy but that are clearly related to familial situations, analogous to those postulated by Bernstein. This is true in spite of the fact that my students are not British and that I am not concerned with social class as a determinant of learning but rather with cultural patterning. Two examples suffice: a young Chinese woman who is in an ESL class with a young French man; both are well educated and literate. One displays the linguistic patterns that might be described as the more limiting verbal behaviors of a positional family, and the other, those that might be described as the more expressive verbal behaviors of the personal family type. My claim is not concerned with how difficult languages are or with how different they are from each other, that is, Chinese is harder than French or French would be closer linguistically to Spanish than to Chinese. Instead I am talking about communication skills, the utilization of linguistic and communicative patterns. Thus we begin to see how the abstract theorizing of a class-conscious sociolinguist is relevant to the American teacher of ESL.

Personal family types, in contrast to positional family structures, are based on the individual psychological functioning of each of the members of the family (regardless of issues of status or whether a particular problem concerns the parent or the child). In these families judgments and decisions are made through inter-status interactions, that is, between parent and child. In some cases even children are

allowed to make decisions because in such families a premium is placed on problem solving. It is more important than status and thus gives rise to "open communication" systems.

The relevance of considering these theoretical postualted familial typologies can be seen in the following example, typical of easily observed situations. A verbal exchange which occurred during a family ESL meeting consisted of a mother who said to her eleven year-old daughter:

M: Go change your pants.

D: Why do I have to?

M: Do as I say! I don't want an argument. And do it now!

One verbal consequence of this family structure is the consistent use of imperatives--an appeal to authority which suggests a closed value system that allows no possible alternative to solutions.

While much of the work I do in ESL situations focuses on speaking, I have also found journal-writing to be a useful and parallel task for my students. Just as dialogue is emphasized through oral language used in the family setting, journals can also be viewed as dialogues--a kind of correspondence, if you will,--between student and teacher. In one journal entry received from a teenager member of a French family, the following interaction was recorded:

M: You may not have the car on Sunday.

S: But, Mom, I need transportation to and from the WHO concert. If not, I can't go.

M: Sorry, but your Dad and I have to visit your aunt then.

S: I know what we can do. I will drive you and pick you up from Aunt Mary's house, that way we can all use the car.

Although from the writer's perspective this example was written to prove that a son could outsmart a parent, several important points are worth noticing, especially in comparison to the example given earlier. First, although the imperative grammatical structure begins the mother's argument, what follows is repartee in which both son and mother express their opinions. Second, it is the son not the mother who wins; he comes up with a persuasive argument. The son seems to feel free to express his point of view - to offer possibilities in the hope of changing the parent's mind. In this case he succeeds, but whether he wins or loses a specific argument is not important. The fact is that the son, in a position of lower status, has an attitude that allows him to be analytical and thus to express the various alternatives. The dispute is therefore not settled through the power structure alone. Rather, the use of language possibility is opened up for the child growing up in such an environment, that of a person-oriented family structure, so that social and linguistic rules are achieved while in positional families they are handed down or assigned by members of higher status. Individuals who developed and reinforced communication patterns in certain family structures will logically face the move to another, a second communication pattern, e.g., ESL, in radically different ways.

This is clearly the locus of difficulties teachers of ESL encounter in encouraging the effective use of classroom-learned English in daily life. It is the classic example of the transfer of learning problems which is too complex a question to be dealt with here. But the family teaching model does seem to be a way to encourage more general use of formally learned linguistic skills.

A foreigner socialized by families who favored the imperative procedures is sensitive to role relations in the context of control. Such an individual, one imagines, might be shocked and confused when placed in a classroom situation where freely volitional procedures were employed.

Some students do not respond well when a teacher allows volunteering an answer when a question is asked. The same students will more easily answer the question if they are directly called to do so. This is a consequence of a family pattern in which authority figures dictated when to ask and when to answer questions. In this context what we as teachers would think of as "putting a student on the spot," which we normally avoid, may be exactly what some students respond to in an ESL classroom.

Similarly, an individual socialized by family structure sensitive to opportunities for choice and individuation would find a classroom situation in which the teacher favored a clear role-differentiation structure highly difficult. This difficulty impedes learning English as a second language.

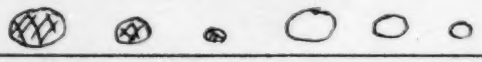
Returning to the example of the young Frenchman whose training in arguing and hypothesis testing has earned him a great deal of respect in French classrooms, we observe that he finds abiding by the teacher's rules almost impossible.

The above distinctions are crude in some ways, especially if we consider that the effect of family structures on learning (especially on learning language) differs not only with respect to culture but also with respect to social mobility and economic change. In other

words, there is no "pure" case of family type generating a predictable specifiable set of verbal behaviors. Instead, family typologies can be seen more in terms of probabilities. They exist only on a continuum of cultural differences tied to social class which generate certain communication patterns. These communication patterns will then be the foundation for learning second and/or third communication systems. In particular, these patterns suggest ways in which first language learning strategies connect with or relate to second language-learning patterns. Not only does this mean that there are implications for teaching English as a second language in foreign family settings directly, but also that there is a reverberation of the family structure within the classroom. Teachers confronted with non-native speakers of English make immediate judgments, and these judgments underly curriculum planning, teaching and evaluation procedures. The view that family structure is important in first language learning has helped me formulate my own opinions and behaviors in the ESL classroom.

It is very interesting that confirmation of this concept of "learning style" described before in relation to Bernstein's work also comes from an entirely different literature--experimental psychology. Rommetveit (1977) argued that different life perspectives arise from what he called "variant institutionally and interpersonally established features of the communicative setting." (p. 168) In Bernstein's framework this setting is the family. But developing Professor Bernstein's argument further, Rommetveit suggests that perceptual, and by extension, verbal factors of this setting, equally as strong as social class, are responsible for different approaches to language learning. Hundeide and Rommetveit (1977) following a classic Piagetian experiment in

psychology showed two groups of five and six year old children an array of six circles as follows:

Spatial Distribution	Checkered vs. White Referential Domain
Separated	
Mixed	

Presented with the mixed array, the children were asked to point out "the one of the white circles that is second largest", which is asking for both cross-classification and ordering of the objects. In addition, in this case ordering is made more difficult because it is restricted to a subset of the whole set of objects, the subset of white circles. Rommetveit and Hundeide asked a second group of children to identify "the one of the snowballs that is the second largest" to show that children who came from what they called "poor social-backgrounds" responded appropriately to the second request but not to the first, while children from a middle-class background could attribute meaning to the first set of directions as well as to the second set. This led the authors to claim that children from a poor background, because of their communicative and institutional contexts, that is their families, were unwilling to "cope with problems detached from practical significance" (p. 173) while those from middle-class backgrounds could engage in a task like ordering for ordering's sake. This seemingly limited result about perception also has important consequences for learning; the incorrect responses to the ordering task by poor children, Rommetveit suggests, supports Bernstein's idea that some families only encourage acceptance of premises imposed by an adult while others encourage questioning of premises detached

from any practical significance. Although Rommetveit does not focus on the structure of the family which gives rise to these two kinds of learning styles, he discusses communication in terms of a speaker and hearer "temporarily shared social reality." This he terms "the intersubjective world of communication." The speaker and hearer both begin with an assumption of trust and with another assumption that what is said is said against the backdrop of what is not stated explicitly. This latter fact about communication is especially relevant for the family and then in an ESL setting where teachers and students may erroneously judge this balance between the explicit and the implicit. I will now turn to two examples which illustrate Bernstein's and Rommetveit's ideas more clearly.

The first example comes from my work with a Korean family--authority oriented and bound by explicit tradition. The six members of this family, father, mother, son, daughter, and two recently arrived brothers of the father, were clear about family role-assignments and about the consequences of these roles on their behavior. Age in this family is of the highest importance, gender is next (male comes before female), experience, that is, time in this country, is last. Thus, the longer a family member has been here the more status he has in the eyes of the family. Superseding all of these factors is education. In this case, fortunately for me, the teacher is respected even more than the oldest in the family.

Korean Family Hierarchy

father (age 45)
mother (age 41)
older brother (age 38)
younger brother (age 31)
son (age 13)
daughter (age 11)

Note: Father, mother, son and daughter have been here for six years. Brothers had arrived a month before our first meeting.

During an initial period of observation, the schematized hierarchy of the family was seen to be causally related to the verbal interactions observed within the family itself. For example, because I as the teacher was assigned even higher status than the father, I was given complete authority and control, that is, I could be the initiator, the guide and the terminator of all communication events and activities. Any disruption by a child during the session was immediately silenced with severe reprimands. My presence was <u>implicitly</u> the rationale for the reprimand. It never had to be explicitly stated. Efforts from all members of the family were directed towards winning my approval first, the father's second, the mother's, then siblings' and so on. One particular incident illustrates this family's strict adherence to rules. In teaching this family a role-playing activity was used in the hope that family members could relax a little.

Father was to be an insurance salesman.
(He chose the specific role.)
Mother - a housewife
Brother 1 - policeman
Brother 2 - milkman
Son - child
Daughter - child

After each member of the family made his wishes known about which role to play, we constructed a script using American English expressions as often as possible. The family and I were moving nicely through a version of the script in which I had unknowingly given the role of policeman to one of the brothers. The young daughter looked puzzled and uncomfortable. When I asked what the problem was, she wanted to change her uncle's role to salesman and her father's to policeman. In her mind higher status was ascribed to policemen and since her father <u>had</u> higher status in the

family, he should be given the role of policeman. In spite of her father's own suggestion to the contrary that it was all right for him to take this role, the child's rigid adherence to solidarity within the family did not allow her to admit the possibility of a switch in roles - even if only for imaginary and instructional purposes.

There are many more such examples which fill pages of my own journal describing my experiences with families and teaching ESL. What I hope I have argued for convincingly is that ESL is not an isolated, free from family-context activity, that application of this idea is possible in direct ways, that is teaching within a foreign family setting and in many other related situations as well. Take for instance the businessman or foreign professional or the academic who comes to the United States with his family. It has been my experience that the father (or working person) learns at least the technical jargon that is required of him, the children may learn English and learn it quickly from peers and the American school experience. The mother and grandparents, however, who stay at home, are usually left behind in this process. There is some recent documentation that family structures in such situations tend to crumble; new rules apply for age-old cultural and behavioral patterns. To be maximally effective the ESL teacher must take into account that all of us, but especially the foreign born, learn strategies for communication from their families first and that these strategies are later consciously or unconsciously applied in all language learning situations.

In conclusion, the position outlined in this paper is theoretically appealing because of its practical consequences in the ESL classroom. If the work of scholars like Rommetveit and Bernstein can be translated

into a method for maximizing the learning potential of foreign-born speakers, we may have found a bridge between theory and practice; one which would suggest topics for further research and enable both the teacher and student in the ESL classroom to focus on English in the broader context of American culture.

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